Coming of Age: THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

The Duke University Education Leadership Summit in February 2002 provided an opportunity to view the evolution of the U.S. Department of Education through the eyes of those who have served as secretaries of education. In this special section, five of the participating secretaries reflect on the chief issues of their respective tenures.

THE DUKE UNIVERSITY EDUCATION LEADERSHIP SUMMIT

- Kenneth A. Dodge
- Martha Putallaz
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GUEST EDITORS

THE SIGNING of the Leave No Child Behind Act of 2001 by President George W. Bush on 8 January 2002 was a defining moment for — and perhaps the grandest achievement of — the U.S. Department of Education in its 29-year history. It signified a clear shift from the department's early role as data keeper and dispenser of student-aid funds to its emergent role as leading education policy maker and reformer. This *Kappan* special section traces the evolution of the department through its leaders and their policies.

The occasion for this special section was the Duke University Education Leadership Summit, held in Durham, North Carolina, on 20 February 2002 and attended by the current secretary of education and every

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living former secretary of education (though Shirley Hufstedler, the first secretary, became ill immediately prior to the meeting and could be there only in spirit and written text). The Education Leadership Summit celebrated the 150th anniversary of the training of teachers at Duke University.

The secretaries engaged in three hours of lively debate, moderated by the former governor of North Carolina, James Hunt, Jr. — a noted education policy maker in his own right. The debate had Republicans sometimes sounding like Democrats (and vice versa); however, no clear consensus on education policy emerged, save for agreement on the fact that the department is playing a strong leadership role these days in shaping the education of children at the local level.

As D. T. Stallings makes clear in his brief history of the department, each of the seven secretaries of education contributed to its current stature and influence in the policy-making arena. Essays by five of the six surviving secretaries (William Bennett chose not to contribute) describe for *Kappan* readers the key issues during that secretary's tenure and lay out a vision for the future of education. In the concluding article of this special section, former Gov. Hunt weaves together the major themes identified by the secretaries and issues a call for further reform.

THE LEAVE NO CHILD BEHIND ACT

The Leave No Child Behind Act, which reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, was in the making for more than a year and has been called "the most far-reaching reform of the nation's public education system" since the creation of the Department of Education in 1979.[1] Passage of the bill required heavy lobbying and bipartisan support that found Secretary Rod Paige and Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) strange bedfellows. Had it not been eclipsed by the terrorist attacks of September 11, the passage of this bill would have represented the most newsworthy event of President Bush's first year in office.

The Leave No Child Behind Act increased the education budget by 20% over that of the previous year. The major goals of the bill included closing the achievement gap for disadvantaged students, improving teacher preparation and rewards, and instituting closely monitored accountability systems for students, teachers, and schools. For the first time ever, states will be required to establish academic standards and to test students annually in grades 3 through 8.

A LOOK BACKWARD

The idea of a federal Department of Education had been around for a while, but it took a confluence of threats from detractors of public education to cause President Jimmy Carter to establish the department as a Cabinet-level agency in 1979. He chose a non-educator and federal court judge, Shirley Hufstedler, to head the new department.

The next secretary, Terrel Bell, was threatened with the abolition of the department from the day he took office in 1981. Nonetheless, he called attention to the plight of American education by appointing the National Commission on Excellence in Education, which released *A Nation at Risk* in April 1983.

The Department of Education gained notoriety with the 1985 appointment of the controversial former chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, William Bennett, as secretary. But Bennett's visits to more than 150 schools led even many of his detractors to respect his commitment to improving children's education.

Lauro Cavazos, a university president, was the first Hispanic appointed to a Cabinet position in any Administration when the first President Bush named him secretary of education in 1988. During his brief tenure, Cavazos emphasized two issues that have endured: providing high-quality education to minority (especially Hispanic) students and establishing performance goals for the nation.

The appointment of Lamar Alexander, a prominent former governor, as secretary in 1990 brought the Department of Education closer to the ear of the President. Another prominent former governor, Richard Riley, succeeded Alexander when Bill Clinton began his first term as President in 1993. Riley's eight-year tenure was by far the longest of any secretary of education. He not only weathered Newt Gingrich's Contract with America in 1994, which reiterated the promise to abolish the department, but also brought to the table numerous substantive policy ideas (e.g., high standards, accountability, and increased investments in education) that helped establish education as the key policy issue in the Presidential election of 2000.

When President George W. Bush assumed office in 2001, he appointed a former school superintendent, Rod Paige, to head the Department of Education and to carry out his education platform. Secretary Paige's

ability to sway such Democrats as Sen. Kennedy and Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.) played a crucial role in the passage of the Leave No Child Behind Act and firmly established the secretary of education as chief lobbyist and bully-pulpit preacher on education issues.

CURRENT ISSUES

Among the many education policy issues facing the nation today, four stand out — and, in this *Kappan* special section, the secretaries provide differing perspectives on each of them.

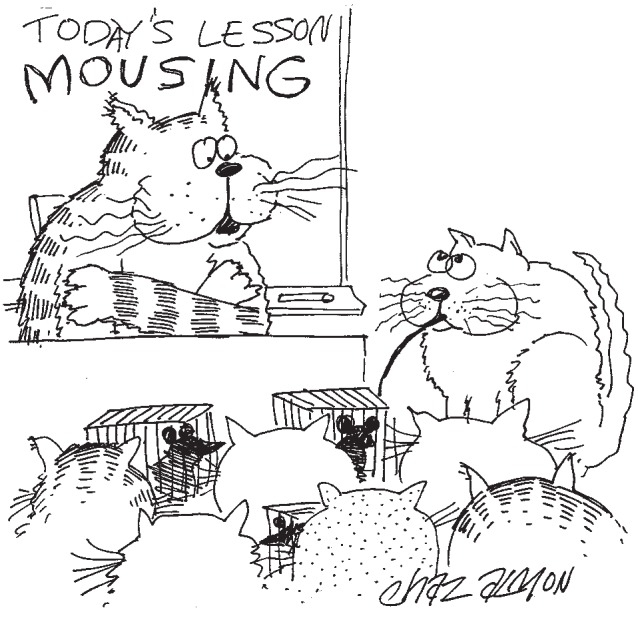
The first such issue is accountability. The emphasis that Secretary Cavazos placed on performance goals led to the ill-fated call for voluntary national testing during the Clinton Administration and has now resurfaced in the requirement of the Leave No Child Behind Act that each state administer some kind of standardized test every year. Texas (where Republican President George W. Bush served as governor) and North Carolina (where Democrat James Hunt, Jr., served as governor) are among the nation's leaders in the accountability movement. In those states, teachers are held accountable for the performance of their students on standardized tests, and students are likewise held accountable through the high stakes attached to those tests. Secretaries Hufstedler and Cavazos recognize the importance of standards, but they caution us against reliance on tests and more tests.

To produce well-rounded young people, the current emphasis on academic performance must be balanced against a second issue: the need for character education. Recent world events have made clear the importance of reexamining our societal values, though the secretaries provide differing points of view on how those values can best be presented to students.

The proliferation in testing has broadened opportunities for quantitative analyses of the third issue: the gaps in achievement between various ethnic and cultural groups. While observers might quibble about the cultural sensitivity of standardized tests, no one argues that the gaps in achievement between majority and minority students are not large, real, and devastating to the nation's future. Whether one construes the goal as closing the achievement gap between majority and minority students or simply as raising the achievement level of minority students probably reveals one's political leanings. Not surprisingly, then, the secretaries have differing perspectives. At the Duke Education Leadership Summit, no one was more outspoken about the magnitude of the problem or more worried about its harmful impact than Secretary Bennett, and no one demonstrated more personal caring about the issue than Secretary Cavazos. But the solutions recommended by the various secretaries ranged wildly — from supporting school choice and vouchers to greater financial investment in core public schooling.

Finally, the issue of preparing the next generation of teachers looms large. Although a substantial number of teachers are trained each year, a distressingly high proportion of them leave the profession within five years. That fact and current demographic trends predict a huge shortage of qualified teachers in coming years — especially of teachers able to serve Spanish-speaking families or to serve students with special needs. All the secretaries bemoaned this impending crisis and wished for higher status for the teaching profession, but they offered only tentative ideas about how to bring larger numbers of talented individuals into teaching.

Throughout this special section, however, the secretaries make clear that the role of the U.S. Department of Education is to shape broad values and policies, to rally support for them, and to bring a national commitment to serving the underserved. Meanwhile, as Gov. Hunt points out, the role of the states and their governors is to craft specific education programs for students in local districts. The contrast is striking.



"Let me guess — you ate your homework again."

1. Kathy Kiely and Tamara Henry, "Will No Child Be Left Behind?," *USA Today*, 17 December 2001, p. 4-D.